

Thérèse's Prayer: Love Growing in Darkness

This is the first of three articles on the Prayer of Thérèse of Lisieux.

One night in 1897, shortly before her death, Thérèse lay awake in bed with her hands folded and eyes raised in prayer. Céline discovered her and asked: “What are you doing? You should be trying to sleep.” Thérèse answered: “I can’t sleep; I am suffering too much, and so I am praying.” “And what are you saying to Jesus?” “I am saying nothing to him; I am loving him.” For Thérèse prayer is the expression of love. “Prayer,” she wrote at the end of her life, “is an aspiration of the heart, it is a cry of gratitude and love in the midst of trial as well as joy...” (*Story of a Soul*, tr. John Clarke OCD, Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1975 242. Henceforth references to this autobiography of Thérèse will be indicated in brackets with “S” and page numbers. This reference would be [S 242]).

This kind of prayer came from her heart in the long hours in chapel—six hours each day of liturgy and mental prayer—in the fervent aspirations on the run as well as the “little nothings” of her moment to moment acts of self-sacrifice which she called rose petals thrown at the feet of Jesus. She told Céline that no more than three minutes ever went by without her thinking of God, a fact that led Victor Sion to write that Thérèse modeled the Carmelite ideal of continuous *actual* presence to God as proposed in the constitutions of Father Rubeo, the general of the order who had encouraged St Teresa in her reform (Op. cit. 19).

Thérèse’s prayer began with the intellect, with reflection, thinking, reading, or observing a holy picture like that of the Holy Face which she kept in her breviary and in her chapel stall and eventually pinned to the

curtain over her bed in the infirmary. One classical mystical experience of the wound of love happened to her as she was making the stations of the cross a few days after her “Act of Oblation to Merciful Love” in June, 1895. Spiritual books were important to Thérèse, especially *The Imitation of Christ*, which she knew by heart, her father’s book of conferences by Abbe Arminjon, and the poems and *The Spiritual Canticle* of St. John of the Cross, which were her standby in the early years in the convent when she was 17 and 18 years old. The gospels and selected biblical texts were her primary nurture for prayer and for guidance. The gospels, she wrote, “occupied my mind at prayer” [S 179]. She had her own copy, which she detached from her manual of piety and carried next to her heart, so she could always meditate (Pierre Descouvemont and Hemuth Nils Loose, *Thérèse and Lisieux*, Toronto: Novalis, 1996, 259) along with the text of her oblation and later on the creed written out in her own blood (Ida Friederike Goerres, *The Hidden Face*, tr Richard and Clara Winston, New York: Pantheon, 1959, 265).

Thérèse thought herself into her prayer, and in formal prayer this usually meant starting with a book. In the final chapter of her autobiography she noted that the sister behind her in chapel who made the disturbing clicking noise “rarely used a book during meditation.” This fact surprised Thérèse and led her to observe whimsically that the sister must have had “many lights” from some other source [S 249]. Thérèse recognized “lights” as the beginning of prayer. In times of dryness she sometimes would say the Our Father or the Hail Mary very slowly

as catalysts for prayer [S 203]. She sought out scripture texts for enlightenment and discernment, as in the case of searching out her own vocation [S 13-16 and 193-195] or trying to understand the darkness that plagued both Céline and herself in July, 1893. The scripture initiated affective conversation with God or deep and silent presence.

Conversation, wordy or silent, is the concept of mental prayer found in Holy Mother Teresa of Avila, “a loving sharing with one who you know loves you,” (*The Book of Her Life*, tr Kieran Kavanaugh, OCD and Otilio Rodriguez, OCD, Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1976, 8.5). It is a definition that shares honors with Thérèse’s description cited on page one for being appropriated by *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* in its magisterial treatment of prayer. (New York: Catholic Book Publishing Co., 1994, nn. 2558 and 2709. Thérèse is cited six times in the Part IV, par 613-687 that treats prayer.) The definition fits Thérèse, who was a contemplative by nature, reflective, intellectually alive, a reader and a thinker. She sought knowledge, not for its own sake or even less as a source of control and power, but in order to understand and appreciate the gifts of God and thereby love rightly. So she opened her mind and heart to the word of God wherever she found it, especially in Scripture but in other books and in the universe as well.

There are three stages in the prayer journey of Thérèse, the first being her life at home before Carmel. Her prayer in these years was full of enthusiasm and consolation with only occasional spells of darkness or aridity that characterized her life in Carmel. There her prayer became the “empty prayer” of silence and dryness (Guy Gaucher, OCD, “Thérèse of Lisieux: Her Trial of Prayer”, in *Sicut Parvuli*, 55[1993], 16-22). This second stage intensified at the end of her life and became the great trial of faith, the third stage of her prayer, that lasted from Easter, 1896, until her death, a year-and-a-half later, on

September 30, 1897. We shall examine each of the stages in some detail.

Stage One: Prayer before Carmel

Thérèse as an infant experienced warm human love and intense religiosity in her family. Her heart, she wrote, “had been raised to God from the dawn of reason...and the world had smiled on [her] from [her] entrance into life” [S 86]. Beloved by God and family she blossomed like a flower with a trusting outgoing disposition and an obsession with God. Her mother wrote that “the baby speaks only of God and wouldn’t miss her prayer for anything; when she speaks of heaven, something heavenly is in her face” [S 29]. Here as elsewhere in her life grace was prevenient, i.e. it took hold of her before her own first act.

Early on and without a teacher she moved naturally into mental prayer. The form of heart-to-heart conversation was suggested to her by Sister Henriette, a lay sister at the Abbey school, who told Thérèse that she should pray to God in the same way as she poured out her heart to her papa at the end of a school day. Thérèse had sought instruction on mental prayer from a resident at the Abbey, Marguerite, as well as from her own older sister Marie, who had declined to teach her on the ground that her vocal prayers were sufficient. The advice from Sister Henriette, which happened at the time of Thérèse’s First Communion, was approved by Pauline, who was already in the Lisieux Carmel (see Sion, *op. cit.* 30-34.).

Several times Thérèse testifies that deep thoughts led her into “real prayer” without her knowing what that blessed gift was. Her father would take her fishing, and she would sit away and alone and ponder the difference between heaven and earth, and “without knowing what it was to meditate,” she wrote, “my soul was absorbed in real prayer” [S 37]. The little girl gave a longer explanation of this experience in the following

account: "One day, one of my teachers at the Abbey asked me what I did on my free afternoons when I was alone. I told her I went behind my bed in an empty space which was there and that it was easy to close myself in with my bed-curtain and that 'I thought.' 'But what do you think about?' she asked. 'I think about God, about life, about ETERNITY...' I understand now that I was making mental prayer without knowing it and that God was already instructing me in secret" [S 74-75].

She thrilled at the lightning, because God seemed close then [S 38]. She compared the star-studded sky with "this dull earth," and at the seashore "everything spoke of God's grandeur and power" [S 48]. She loved to think things over in bed, reading holy books like the life of Joan of Arc, reflecting "with deep thoughts " on Pauline's weekly letter from the convent or on such items as Marie's statement on renunciation.

Even in her prayer as a child there were mystical moments. Her First Communion at age eleven was a grace-filled event with the signs of an extraordinary mystical experience. It was "the first kiss of Jesus," suggesting other kisses in the future. Jesus and Thérèse "looked at each other and understood." She felt very much beloved and loving in return. There was "fusion" with Jesus, "like a drop of water in the ocean," and in him a sense of union with her mother in heaven and with Pauline in the convent [SS 77-78]. But for the most part her religious experiences were not Pentecostal outpourings of the Spirit in the style of Acts 2 but sensing "the sheer sound of silence" of 1 Kings 19. In the deep pain of facing Pauline's entrance into Carmel she "felt" and "understood" with such force there could be no doubt that the desert was to be her vocation too. This was not "the dream of a child led astray," she wrote, "but the certitude of a divine call." She concluded: "I was thinking very much about things which words could not express but which left a great peace in my soul" [S 58]. The discernment

here is a contemplative experience, the mystical *sentir* of St Ignatius of Loyola.

Thérèse's prayer life was the antidote to the losses she sustained growing up. She was a high-strung, super-sensitive child. Her mother's death at her age four and a half ended the halcyon days of innocence. She lost her buoyant spirit and became timid and easily hurt. "One look was enough to reduce me to tears" [S 35]. She over-reacted in petty sufferings, all the while knowing her pain and distress were out of proportion and due to immaturity. At age thirteen when she forgot the bouquet of flowers intended for her mother's grave, she sobbed uncontrollably. "I made a fuss over everything," she wrote two years before her death. "I was just the opposite of what I am now, for God has given me the grace not to be downcast at any passing thing" [S 91].

The year-and-a-half bout with scruples, from May, 1885, to November, 1886, just before the Christmas experience, was the climax of the emotional roller coaster. A long time earlier, at her First Communion, Marie, her doctor through the scruples, had predicted that God would "carry" the Little Flower and not lead her by suffering. Thérèse knew otherwise. She had asked for suffering at her second Holy Communion and embraced it willingly, especially after her Christmas conversion, when she saw it as part of her vocation to pray for sinners like the murderer Pranzini.

Prayer was her solace in all this suffering. Prayer was a refuge at the Abbey boarding school, when she faced an apathetic, or even hostile world unprotected by family. There the harsh winds of jealousy and taunting drove her into her own little shell. The five year period from seven-and-a-half to thirteen were "the saddest days" of her life. Too bright and letter-perfect in her deportment she did not "fit in" and found herself an outsider. The gallery of the church became an oasis in

the desert, where she could go and be quiet for ten minutes before the tabernacle [S 86].

She spent long hours in Pauline's old painting studio at Les Buissonnets, cluttered like any attic with plants and memorabilia, but removed from household traffic, and thus a place where she could be "alone for hours on end to study and meditate" [S 91]. Her prayer life gave strength and balance through these afflictions and provided a remarkable peace in spite of the emotional turmoil [S 58-59]. This peace was consolidated by the Christmas healing when there was inner joy and not just outward composure in spite of deep hurt in her heart. God gave her strength to deal

effectively with her emotions, which for ten years, ever since her mother's death, were too erratic and out of control [S 98].

Thus there was darkness in this first period of her prayer life, but a darkness from without, independent and standing outside the prayer. Thérèse suffered because of human weakness, and prayer provided an opposing force. The prayer confronted Thérèse's immaturity. Her prayer gave her strength to navigate the troubled waters. It was love growing in darkness, but in this first period the prayer and the darkness were two alternating poles fighting for Thérèse's soul. (*to be continued*).